

PRESIDENT BUSH NEWS CONFERENCE

Time: 8:33 a.m.

Location: White House, Briefing Room

Date: May 8, 1991

The Washington Post _____
The New York Times _____
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The Wall Street Journal _____
The Christian Science Monitor _____
New York Daily News _____
USA Today _____
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PRESIDENT BUSH: Well, it is with a great sense of pride--genuine pride in his accomplishments--and long years of dedicated service to his country, that I announce that Bill Webster has informed me of his intention to retire as the director of Central Intelligence. Bill will be leaving federal service after 26 years on the federal bench as director of the FBI and as director of the CIA. And as a former DCI, I know the complex organizations and inter-relationships that comprise our intelligence community.

Bill has brought an integrity, an effectiveness, and an insight to the many intelligence-gathering operations of this nation. He has done a superb job. A strong nation requires a strong intelligence organization, and Bill Webster has directed our efforts according to the guidelines that I set down at the beginning of this administration, that the CIA would have the single mission of providing intelligence to the policy makers of this government. And he's performed admirably. And that is a very important point. Intelligence not trying to shape policy.

There are those who think CIA should have a different role, but I believe Bill Webster has demonstrated the value of an intelligence organization that is professionally directed and purposely committed. It is invaluable in defending the security of America.

I noticed what one of our coalition partners said--the dependence on United States intelligence in the recent war. In so many ways he has performed with great distinction and the best--the best--in the sense of service to his country. And I hate to see him go. This was his choice, but I offer him my thanks, and I offer him the thanks of a very grateful nation, as he finishes this distinguished career in government and considers other avenues. And he can say a few words now, and then I'll be glad to take just a few questions. Director, we're going to miss you, pal, but you're not leaving right now. We're not going to let him go.

WILLIAM WEBSTER: Thank you, Mr. President. I have many mixed feelings about this morning. There's never an easy time to go, especially when you are working for an organization that you believe in and for people that you believe in. It's been an extraordinary experience to have worked with you, Mr. President. I have worked with you and for you for the last 10 years, and I want to say before I comment further that I know a good thyroid when I see one.

PRESIDENT BUSH: Swallow gently.

WEBSTER: I think I'm leaving you--I know I'm leaving you--a healthy organization, one that has had, during the last four years, I think, a good track record for its accountability, in so far as it's possible to be accountable. We have positioned ourselves for the challenges of the '90's, which are different than the challenges of the '80's, and I'm very proud of the performance that the entire community rendered during the Persian Gulf.

I realized a couple of months ago that I had finished 20 years of service--in consecutive service--and that I was approaching the end of a four year term--not term, but four year period. My commission says, to serve at the pleasure of the president for the time being. And this has been a four year time being that I've been very proud of, and privileged to have served, not only with the president, but with his national security advisers.

But it seemed to me that this was a good window. You hate to leave, but something tells you that it's a good time to leave. I still have my roots in the law, and this gives me an opportunity to pursue other avenues in the private sector. So there you are.

PRESIDENT BUSH: When is the four years--

WEBSTER: May 26th.

PRESIDENT BUSH: May 26th--but we've got to be flexible on all that. Now, either the director or I will be glad to take questions.

Q: Did this come as a surprise? Do you have a successor in mind?

PRESIDENT BUSH: We haven't talked successor--haven't got anyone in mind, but it did come as a surprise when Bill brought this up to me. He told me this several days ago. And it was his decision. I told him that what I've said--essentially said here publicly--and he called in yesterday evening and said he thought we ought to go with this announcement.

Q: Bob Gates had been nominated once before. Would he be a candidate?

PRESIDENT BUSH: Well, as I said, I haven't considered successors yet, but a worthy man, Gates. We all have great respect for him.

Q: Early on during the war with Iran (sic) the CIA came under some criticism for not being as informative, not being as informed, perhaps, as it should have been. Was that a factor in this--

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PRESIDENT BUSH: We all came under criticism early on. And all I say is, look at the results. And in my view, the intelligence was superb. I would call your attention to what the French commander--French--who was it, yesterday--commenting on the intelligence that they had to depend on. So we all got criticism. The CIA got a little. The Defense Department got a little. We took on some water over here. But the result was superb, and the intelligence was outstanding, and the community performed fantastically. I had a chance to mention that out at NSA, which is a part of the intelligence community. I hope I'll have a chance to go out to CIA again and say this. But I have no complaints, whatsoever, about the quality of our intelligence.